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JFK's sleepy archive's wake-up call

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Lights out

ITS last call at Costello's. The
last 44th Street gym mill; the holy
land. Odd

FOR most of the eight years since James H. Lesar founded it, the Assassination Archives and Research Center attracted about as many visitors as Lee Harvey Oswald's grave.

But lately, the phone at Lesar's dingy Washington, D.C. office won't stop ringing. Ever since Oliver Stone's "JFK" has sounded the clarion, the archive has come alive with people bent on finding out who really killed John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Anybody can come in," Lesar tells PAGE SIX's George Rush. That open-door policy means that Lesar sometimes has to shoo away the stray paranoiac looking for evidence that the CIA is bugging his brain.

"We prefer to help the serious scholar," Lesar admits. His archive was called, when Stephen Bondheim was writing his short-lived musical "Assassins." A researcher hired by Stone camped at the center for several

weeks to comb the files donated by aides to former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison.

Asked what he thought of Stone's picture, Lesar cautiously answers, "I'm not really prepared to comment, but obviously it's had an enormous impact and the beneficial result of opening records. It's a very well-made film. Many of the New Orleans characters are extremely well portrayed."

Housed in a weary-looking office building, the center has the country's richest private collection of material pertaining to political murders. On hand are 2,000 books, 180,000 pages of FBI documents, and an index of 30,000 names tied to intelligence agencies.

"We have some material on George Wallace, a little on [John] Swisher [prime minister] Old Palme, Mahatma Gandhi, and other historical figures. But the front runner by far is JFK." The archive depends on the \$25 annual fee

contributed by the center's 400 members. Much of Lesar's income comes from his practice as a lawyer specializing in helping authors pry loose official files under the Freedom of Information Act.

Lesar himself is working on a book, "but only haphazardly. I simply haven't had time with my law practice."

Despite his reservations about "JFK," Lesar says, "I've seen greater liberties taken by the news media, which lacks the literary justification of that movie."

The blending of fact and fiction in "JFK" and other movies will be the theme of a symposium that the Nation Institute is sponsoring on Tuesday at Town Hall here. Taking the stage will be Stone, author Edward J. Epstein, Nora Ephron (who scripted Mike Nichols' movie about Karen Silkwood) and Norman Mailer, who's called Stone's docu-drama "one of the worst great movies ever made."